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*The Miskito Indians in
Sandinista Nicaragua*



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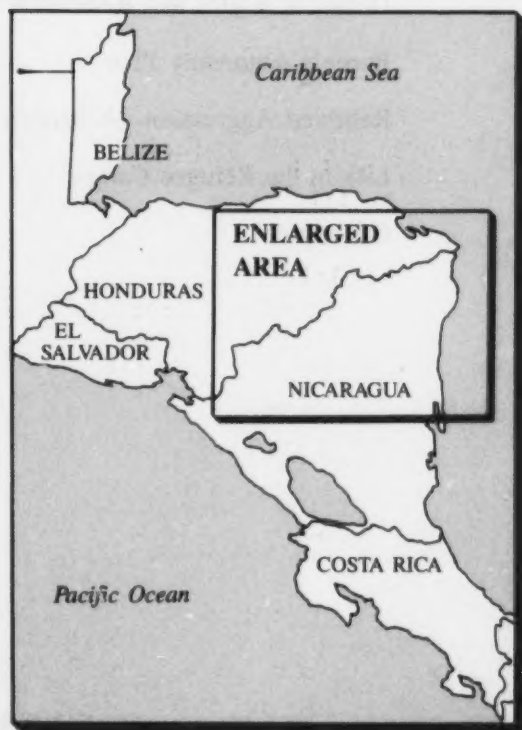
The Miskito Indians in Sandinista Nicaragua

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Historically, the Atlantic Coast and the region bordering the Coco River have been home to Nicaragua's Miskito and Sumo populations. Farther south, Rama Indians lived near the Costa Rican frontier. Fleeing forced relocation, execution, and destruction of property at the hands of the Sandinista government, as many as 20 to 30 percent of these people now live in refugee camps in Honduras. A smaller number have fled to Costa Rican settlements.



Introduction

To the Indian nations, the Nicaraguan state is a superpower that has invaded and expropriated their lands, forcibly imposed foreign controls, and denied Indian peoples any rights to territory, resources, or freedom to pursue their own ways of life. The Indian war seeks to remove the Sandinista state from Indian lands and communities.

—Bernard Nietschmann, Professor of Geography, University of California (Berkeley), "Indian Nations and the Nicaraguan State," *Indian War and Peace with Nicaragua*, Center for World Indigenous Studies, 1985, p. 29.

On March 25 and 26, 1986, Sandinista soldiers attacked three Nicaraguan Miskito Indian communities, causing some 10,500 residents along the lower Coco River to flee to Honduras in one of the largest movements of Nicaraguan refugees since the Sandinista revolution. Army troops bombarded the villages with mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, and tank guns, as Indian resistance combatants struggled to repel them with light arms. One young Miskito father said: "Whenever the Sandinistas come, it is not safe. We Miskitos cannot be where the Sandinistas are." The action signaled an end to an uneasy truce between the Miskitos and the Sandinista government.

Historically, there has been little understanding between the peoples of the east and the west coasts of Nicaragua. Under the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), relations have not only gotten worse, but they have evolved into open warfare. Shortly after the revolution, the government insisted that Cuban-style block committees replace tribal councils, that religion be supplanted with allegiance to the FSLN, and that Indian lands belong to the state, instead of to community farmers.

As resistance to these policies mounted, the FSLN tried various strategies to bring the Indians under control. The government forced some 10,000 to 12,000 Miskitos and Sumos into relocation camps in 1982 to work collective farms and listen to Sandinista rhetoric. Those who resisted



After returning to Bilwaskarma in June 1985, these Moravian Miskitos held a service in what remained of their church—partially dismantled by the Sandinistas when townspeople were forced into relocation camps to the south.

were often tortured and assassinated. When these measures only strengthened the Indians' resolve, the government began admitting "past errors" and moved to release some of the Indian prisoners.

In June 1985, the Sandinistas changed tactics. Although negotiations between the Sandinistas and a significant portion of the Indian resistance failed to produce an agreement on territorial rights and local autonomy, Interior Minister Tomas Borge revealed that he had reached an accord with some independent rebel leaders that

would allow some Miskitos to return to the northeastern border. That month, the FSLN opened the gates of the Tasba Pri relocation camp and allowed 10,000–12,000 Miskito Indians to return home after a four-and-a-half year confinement. Comandante Omar Cabezas admitted that "the revolutionary government and the FSLN committed an error in their treatment of the Indians."¹

By October, the northeastern border resettlement was largely complete. Yet there was little progress on the autonomy

2. By January 1986, FSLN troops reinforced garrisons near the re-inhabited villages. In March, the Sandinistas attacked, shattering hopes that promises of local autonomy and noninterference might be more than just public relations ploys.

Harsh measures, publicly interpreted as "mistakes" by FSLN leaders, were part of a comprehensive policy to crush all possible sources of opposition. Attacks on the Miskitos have served the same purpose as censorship of the press, church repression, and harassment of opposition political party leaders in other sectors of Nicaraguan society. Because the Indians enjoyed a degree of autonomy under the previous government, they became a source of strong resistance to Sandinista authoritarianism. Now some 36,000 live in exile in Honduran refugee camps. Those who remain in Nicaragua live under military rule and daily fear of Sandinista repression. ■



This Miskito father and two-year-old son are among 10,500 refugees who crossed the Coco River to Honduras in April 1986. They left behind homes in what were once well-developed communities with hospitals, schools, and churches.

Shared Territory

The indigenous inhabitants of eastern Nicaragua were traditionally farmers and fishers whose culture was characterized by a communal lifestyle. Despite the Spanish conquest in the fifteenth century, they retained their autonomy and remained geographically isolated on the Caribbean Coast—relatively untouched by Latin society. In the 1640s, a Portuguese ship carrying African slaves sunk offshore, and survivors mixed with the Indians, forming the basis of the dominant Miskito culture.

In the late seventeenth century the Miskitos began selling cacao to British traders. Later, gold and mahogany became valuable commodities, and Great Britain came to consider the region its protectorate.² But British influence declined in the mid-nineteenth century, and the Crown signed a treaty recognizing Nicaragua's claim to the territory, even though the Miskito nation wanted international recognition of its own sovereignty. From about 1850 to the turn of the century, Protestant

German missionaries established Moravian churches that still influence Miskito community life today. The predominant languages are Miskito, Creole English, and Spanish. Surnames like Tess, Taylor, and Herman are common.

During the Somoza years, U.S. and Canadian companies tapped the rich natural resources of the Nicaraguan Mosquitia. Although tribal life was untouched, many Indians felt exploited. When the development boom declined in the late 1960s, the Indians were left with little more than temporary employment in remaining forestry and mining industries. In 1972, Indian leaders organized the Alliance for Progress of the Miskitos and Sumos (ALPROMISU). The movement encouraged the development of farmland, teaching of the Miskito language, Indian representation in the national government, and reestablishment of Indian control of communal property.



A Miskito woman separating rice from stalks collected at a nearby community plantation. Rice, beans, and roots like cassava form a basic diet which, in more peaceful times, was supplemented by fish, chicken, and beef.

Although the Somoza regime generally refrained from interfering with daily life among the Miskitos, ALPROMISU realized that it did little to improve the lot of the Miskitos. As a result, some tribal leaders gave moral support to the Sandinistas in the 1979 revolution, and, after the revolution, changed the name of their organization to MISURASATA (Miskito, Sumo, Rama, and Sandinista Unity). Led

by two charismatic youths, Brooklyn Rivera and Steadman Fagoth Muller, the Indians hoped for a closer relationship with the new government, and even nurtured greater hopes of keeping their language, land, and culture free from outside interference. Those dreams were shattered when Interior Minister Tomas Borge attempted to force them into the new revolutionary order. ■

Denial of Rights and Relocation

After Somoza's ouster, the FSLN placed Indian lands under state control, dismissed traditional claims to self-government, and moved to restructure Atlantic Coast society according to Marxist models. Widespread protests resulted, and the Sandinista response was immediate and harsh.

On September 30, 1979, FSLN troops apprehended 30 young Miskito activists in the coastal town of Puerto Cabezas and accused them of anti-government activities. At the same time, the Sandinistas executed Lester Athas, a respected community leader in the border village of Saklin and an outspoken proponent of Indian rights. Although public outcries forced the soldiers to release the prisoners, tension mounted over Athas's death. Meanwhile, the Sandinista army in the Mosquitia grew to some 7,000 troops, while Cuban advisers, doctors, and teachers took over the duties of local professionals and Indian educators.

The Miskitos largely avoided the Cuban-run clinics. They claimed the Cuban doctors often misdiagnosed ailments, were frequently unqualified, or were students passing themselves off as doctors. With equal disdain, they began to avoid the classroom, where they thought there was too much political content in the lessons.

Friction accelerated with the arrival of Communist-style "mass organizations" such as the Sandinista Defense Committees (CDS) which disrupted existing political and social patterns. MISURASATA leader Steadman Fagoth, given a seat in the Sandinista Council of State, lobbied the government for commitments to honor

Indian demands for rights to communal land and self-government. But Comandante Jaime Wheelock accused the group of "a large ideological backwardness." This charge was echoed by Comandante Luis Carrion Cruz and other Sandinista leaders.³ In February 1981, MISURASATA tried to work out differences on land rights and literacy programs, but the Sandinistas decided not to deal with the organization. On February 19, key MISURASATA leaders were arrested in Managua after being invited to a meeting at Wheelock's office. Steadman Fagoth and Brooklyn Rivera were among them.

After being jailed in Managua, Fagoth was released by promising to return to the Mosquitia, quiet his people, and then accept a scholarship to study in a Soviet-bloc country. Fagoth returned to the Atlantic Coast, but soon escaped to Honduras. Meanwhile, Comandante William Ramirez, the Sandinista military commander in the Mosquitia, threatened to kill Rivera, forcing him to flee to Honduras in August 1981. That same month, the Sandinistas outlawed MISURASATA.

On December 22, government soldiers captured 80 Miskitos in the northern border village of Leimus in action that was later condemned by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Although accounts vary, about 35 young men were executed and placed in a mass grave. A day later, according to Miskito witnesses, the nearby communities of Asang and San Carlos were bombarded by government helicopters and light aircraft.⁴

Before the development of large, organized resistance movements, the Sandinistas evacuated the northeastern border areas, citing "security dangers." In January 1982, about 10,000-12,000 east coast Indians were uprooted from their homes near the Coco River and marched into crowded relocation camps west of Puerto Cabezas and north of Jinotega and Matagalpa. The main complex, near Puerto Cabezas, was called Tasba Pri, which means, ironically, "free land." The Miskitos were often rousted out of bed late at night, then forced at gunpoint to begin the long march. Those who resisted were labeled "counter-revolutionaries" and were often killed. In the wake of their departure, belongings were confiscated, homes were razed, and cattle slaughtered to deter them from wanting to return.

The urgency of this program was demonstrated when a Sandinista Mi-8 helicopter carrying 75 Miskito children and 17 women to a relocation camp crashed in Jinotega Department in December 1982, killing all of the children and nine women. Defense Minister Humberto Ortega tried to cover up the FSLN's error of haste in trying to evacuate Miskito villagers. He charged that the dead were "victims of the Yankee-Somocist reactionary attack on our revolutionary people." He denied that the aircraft, which normally carries 32 passengers, was overloaded.

The 1984 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights report on the relocation and mistreatment of the Miskito Indians commented:

In the period between January 1 and February 20, 1982, the relocation of approximately 8,500 people was effected. Approximately half of the Rio Coco region population fled to Honduras, fearing that their lives were in danger. . . .

The relocation in Tasba Pri of some Miskitos, and the flight to Honduras of others, uprooted the Miskitos from the banks of the Coco River, where they had lived from time immemorial, resulting in the division of numerous towns and entire families, the destruction of their homes, the loss of their livestock, and, in some cases, all

of their belongings. The Miskito structure of authority was undermined and later dissolved *de facto* as a result of the repression of the MISURASATA leaders, who were accused of "counter-revolutionary" activities....

Hundreds of Miskitos have been arbitrarily detained without any formalities and under vague accusations of carrying out "counter-revolutionary activities"; many of these detentions have been followed by prolonged periods of incommunicado imprisonment and in some cases the Commission has verified that torture and abuse took place.⁵

As hundreds of other Miskitos were fleeing north to Honduras to avoid the relocation camps, some MISURASATA members, influenced by the more militant Steadman Fagoth, broke off to form MISURA, which dropped the Sandinista part of the MISURASATA name and began intermittent combat operations against the Sandinistas in the north. Meanwhile, the army moved to consolidate its control of the Atlantic coast. FSLN troops occupied the village of Bilwaskarma and converted the schoolhouse into a military headquarters. In neighboring Pranza, El Carmen, Lakun Tara, Bulsirpi, and San Jeronimo they burned houses, churches, and schools. Farther south, they tortured and killed innocent civilians to obtain information on rebel activities. According to Bernard Nietschmann, a geography professor at the University of California (Berkeley), who has studied Nicaraguan Indians extensively, the Sandinistas sought to control other aspects of Miskito life.

The Miskitos used to produce the majority of their basic food needs; in some communities 70% or more of all they consumed was obtained from their small farms, from fishing in rivers, lagoons, and at sea, and from hunting in the forests and lowland swamps. During the late 1960s and 1970s when I lived in Miskito villages people produced food in sufficient quantities and hunger was very uncommon. At present, hunger is a considerable

problem. This is because the Miskitos have been forbidden to go far from their villages to plant. This restriction on freedom of movement is evidently a response to the Sandinistas' fear that the villagers would make contact with Miskito warriors in the bush. The villagers are not permitted to fish because of similar restrictions and the lack of canoes in many villages. They also are not permitted to go hunting because all hunting arms—such as .22 rifles and shotguns—have been confiscated.

In order to limit the availability of food for the Miskito warriors, the Sandinista military has

limited and prohibited the production of food by Miskito civilians. To affect one group, another group is made to go hungry.⁶

For the Miskitos, 1982 was a particularly bad year. The Nicaraguan Interior Ministry's own investigations showed that the government was responsible for imprisoning some 400 Miskitos and executing 250 others as suspected counter-revolutionaries. Frequently, these actions were directed against innocent civilians following resistance activities against Sandinista troops. By December, various foreign governments and international organizations, including the Inter-American Human Rights Commission,



"Here we are like pigs in the mud," said Julio Centeno, wearing a light-colored cap and standing ankle deep in a puddle. Andres Diaz, standing to his left, lost two grandchildren in the December 1982 helicopter crash that killed 84 persons in a relocation evacuation north of Jinotega.



San Antonio de Upa and Isla de Upa camps are related facilities a short distance outside the regional capital of Matagalpa. Camp residents are almost exclusively Miskito Indians from upper Coco River villages. At both camps they are forced to work in "state production units" or collective farms that directly support the national economy.

At various times the Sandinistas have claimed as many as 200,000 persons "displaced internally" in Nicaragua. Many live in relocation camps, forced to leave their homes and belongings in the hands of the government. More than just internment sites to keep people from aiding armed resistance groups, these camps serve as state labor collectives, where "prisoners" are expected to pick coffee or tend plantations to support the national economy.

At the beginning of 1985, some 8,000 persons were being held in relocation camps outside Jinotega and Matagalpa; half of those were Miskito and Sumo Indians. At relocation facilities near Tasba Pri and Sumobila near the Atlantic Coast, some 12,000 Miskitos were confined until June, when the government announced its own limited autonomy plan and released the inhabitants to go back to their native villages.



Sandinista soldiers form a loose security net around facilities like La Sorpresa. Although internees sometimes manage to leave, they cannot return to their abandoned homes.



A Miskito mother and daughter in the La Sorpresa relocation camp some 40 kilometers north of Jinotega. Half of the camp's 500-600 residents are Miskitos; the other half are Hispanics.

repeatedly questioned the Nicaraguan government about the fate of hundreds of missing Indians. When the Interior Ministry made its own investigation, the report concluded: "it is the members of the EPS [Sandinista Popular Army] who have

caused discontent and problems with the civilian population due to their bad treatment and abuses."⁷ Although a special political education program was recommended for mid-level army officers to halt these abuses, no action was ever taken. ■

Borge's Autonomy Plan

Here there are no whites, blacks, Miskitos, or Creoles. Here there are revolutionary and counter-revolutionary Nicaraguans, regardless of color of their skin. The only thing that differentiates us is the attitude we assume toward the nation.

—Interior Minister Tomas Borge
Bluefields, April 26, 1985

Despite strong measures, the Sandinistas failed to subdue the Indians. Indian rebels consistently outmaneuvered FSLN forces, and the remaining rural population gave the government little support. Even the relocation camps were not completely successful. Tasba Pri residents threatened a mass exodus despite harsh consequences and refused to work hard enough to enable the camp's farm collective to be economically self-sustaining. In November 1984, the Sandinistas changed strategy by admitting "past errors" and set up an Atlantic Coast working group to recommend solutions to the problem of disaffection among the Miskitos.

The next month, with reconciliation in the air, Brooklyn Rivera's MISURASATA organization presented a five-part proposal to the Nicaraguan government during peace negotiations in Bogota, Colombia. The document included official recognition of the Indians' ethnic identity and territorial autonomy, an end to institutional repression, a cease-fire, and a three-party monitoring commission. These talks continued on April 20-22, 1985, in Mexico City and on May 25-26 in Bogota. Discussions broke down during the May encounter when the FSLN delegate, Comandante Luis Carrion Cruz, refused to accept demilitarization of the Atlantic Coast or outside membership on the tripartite commission, such as an observer from the Organization of American States human rights commission.

The Sandinistas subsequently held rump negotiations with a small number of independent rebel commanders and announced new agreements. On May 29 in Puerto Cabezas, Tomas Borge declared an end to Miskito captivity and a new policy of noninterference as if conclusive talks had taken place. He pointed out that armed actions by various indigenous groups "derived in a large measure from our lack of knowledge and errors." But on the subject of relocation camps, Borge said that "it was necessary at the time the decision was taken," and that such action was not to be considered "an error." He concluded that the facilities would remain open, and half of the Indians would remain there. In June, he announced the formation of a national autonomy commission to work out the details of a program to give the Indians greater participation in local government and guarantees of noninterference. Return of communal property and demilitarization of the region still remained stumbling points. Suspecting that the Sandinistas promised these concessions only for international propaganda purposes, neither MISURASATA nor MISURA endorsed the accord.

Between June and October 1985, thousands of Miskitos left the Tasba Pri relocation camp, and what Radio Sandino described as "released prisoners" expressed their gratitude to the revolutionary government on news broadcasts covering the story. Miskitos held in the

camps outside Jinotega and Matagalpa in central Nicaragua were not released. Meanwhile, resistance activities came to a standstill, except for an organizational change in the MISURA faction. In September MISURA joined the umbrella resistance organization UNO (United Nicaraguan Opposition) and became known as KISAN (Miskito for United Indigenous Peoples of Eastern Nicaragua).⁸

As late as August, most Atlantic Coast residents were not even aware of the autonomy commission's work. In September, both Borge and Carrion told coastal leaders to formulate a proposal of their own if the government position was not acceptable. In the meantime, FSLN reinforcements began moving back into the northeastern border area, and, according to recent refugee testimony, soldiers dressed as Red Cross personnel began visiting rehhabited border villages to gather intelligence. Farther south, Miski-

We are speaking of an autonomy that rejects oppression, that recognizes profiles and fingerprints of each social group, and of... the right of the Indians to speak and teach freely in their language, to have their own forms of social organization, and to use their own lands.

—Interior Minister Tomas Borge
Puerto Cabezas, June 27, 1985

to communities were still subject to attack. In January 1986, the Atlantic Coast town of Layasiksa was bombarded by the Sandinista air force during a visit by MISURASATA leader Brooklyn Rivera and representatives of American Indian organizations.⁹ In February, along the northern border, there were reports that the FSLN had resumed forced conscription of Miskito youth. ■



At a Moravian church service in Bilwaskarma, returning villagers recall bitter memories of their forced relocation—arbitrary arrests, torture, and destruction of personal property. Most of their homes and community buildings were either dismantled or vandalized following their departure to camps like Tasba Pri.



In 1982 the Sandinista army removed 2,500 people from the lower Coco River community of Waspam. Above is what remains of the town hall, partially dismantled and abandoned following the forced evacuation.



The Catholic Church in Waspam was also abandoned in the wake of forced relocation. Its elaborate steeple remains standing although other buildings have been taken apart to supply building materials for Sandinista army bases.

Renewed Aggression—A Broken Promise

On March 25, 1986, new attacks by the Sandinista government against the Miskito Indians sparked one of the largest single movements of refugees since the Sandinistas came to power in Nicaragua. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) representatives, between March 25 and April 16, some 7,500 Nicaraguan Miskitos crossed the Nicaraguan-Honduran border and were processed at UNHCR refugee centers in Honduras. Some 3,000 additional refugees have entered Honduras but have not proceeded to the reception centers.

New arrivals told relief workers that Sandinista soldiers moved against the

Nicaraguan village of Bilwaskarma early on March 25, the Tuesday before Easter, to establish military control and drive out suspected Indian resistance elements—breaking recent promises not to interfere with Miskito community life. Dozens of protesting citizens were reportedly arrested and confined. Meanwhile, FSLN soldiers reinforced their attack with tanks, mortars, and rocket-launched grenades. Indian resistance forces in the area attacked the Sandinista garrison and reportedly released some prisoners. Refugee and rebel sources said Bilwaskarma was heavily damaged by Sandinista artillery.

About three o'clock the same day, government troops attacked the nearby vil-

lage of Kum. Some sources reported five civilians and four resistance combatants killed. Refugees who fled neighboring villages claim that Sandinista soldiers dressed as Nicaraguan Red Cross workers were traveling through the area gathering military intelligence.

As Sandinista action against Miskito Indian communities continued, several thousand Indians fled across the Coco River into Honduras. The arrival of some 10,500 more refugees brings the total number of Nicaraguan Indians sheltered in Honduras to about 36,000 including those in UN refugee camps and in border settlements assisted by various charities. That is nearly a third of the 110,000 Miskito, Sumo, and Rama Indians that lived in Nicaragua when the Sandinistas came to power in 1979.¹⁰

Almost all of those now crossing into Honduras are part of the 10,000–12,000 released last year by the Sandinistas from interior relocation camps in July 1985. In the wake of these arrivals, the Honduran government declared the Honduran Mosquitia an "Emergency Zone." Tribal leaders say 4,000 more Indians may cross into Honduras before summer is over.

In an attempt to evade responsibility, the Sandinistas blamed the exodus on KISAN. The Sandinistas said KISAN organized the movement to affect the U.S. congressional vote on funding the Nicaraguan armed resistance. KISAN commander Adan Artola countered that the organization opposed the flight, and pointed out that the exodus has created problems for both KISAN and relief workers: "We tried several times to convince them to stay before these recent attacks. When they crossed, they crossed alone, because all of our combatants were in battle."¹¹ For KISAN, it meant the loss of a support base to UNHCR refugee camps. But observers who talked with newly arriving refugees in December 1985 reported that it was only a question of time. Many in the Nicaraguan border villages had a persistent desire to cross because of bitter memories, lack of food, and mounting Sandinista threats against their lives.



Guillermo Chow (left) and Enriquez Alban (right) testified in Washington, D.C., concerning their flight from Bilwaskarma and Wasla after the March 1986 attack by Sandinista troops.

Witnesses Describe the Attack

On March 25, 1986, 60-year-old Guillermo Chow was awakened by the sound of gunfire outside his home in Bilwaskarma. Later, with his wife and infant daughter, he escaped to Honduras. On April 16, he gave the following account in English.

At three o'clock in the morning, they wake us up with heavy bullet fire. My wife said, "Come and get up." Well, I get up and I put my pants and working boots [on], and I say to her "Get the baby." So, a few minutes after that, another heavy bullet went, and after that, a machine gun let go in the middle of town. When I check, there was a war tank in the town, facing into the schoolhouse. . . . I couldn't run out at that moment because it was dark yet. So I said to my wife, take that sponge mattress from the bed. . . . and wrap up the baby and yourself.

I think about four o'clock I could more or less see my way to get out through the bush and hide, and get down to the river. And that's the way I get out—left my home and start to creep. Then I get close to the river bank, where I could hide. Then I stay there by the big clearing, but before that. . . . I hear another kind of bullet firing. At that moment the boys [Indian resistance fighters], they wasn't here when the Sandinista went and attack. Why didn't they [the resistance] have a base in Bilwaskarma? Maybe they was close, coming in, so they start to face with them. We clear [away] from Sandinista because we are safer on the other side of the [Coco] river.

But when we come in from Tasba Pri, September last year, at the Sandinista command post, we begged them, "We are asking you a favor to keep far away from Bilwas—because we don't want to live with soldiers in our homes." And they say yes, and they did it. They went far, I don't know where they went, but they had no base in Bilwas. But why, last month, the 25th of March, at three o'clock in the morning, they [the Sandinistas] went in with the heavy tanks and start to open fire?¹²

For 25 years Guillermo Chow worked as a laborer in the missionary hospital in Bilwaskarma. In 1981 he was jailed along with seven other employees, on suspicion of being a counter-revolutionary. He later joined fellow citizens in the Tasba Pri relocation camp 45 miles southwest of Bilwaskarma, where he remained with his wife until September 1985, when they were allowed to go home.

In the town of Wasla, 53-year-old Enriquez Alban lived with his wife and eight children. Wasla, a short walk from Kum, was shelled on the afternoon of March 25.

At three o'clock in the evening we were having a service. . . . to take Holy Communion. And while we were there at the service, we heard a bomb [mortar] drop into the town. We listened to it, and people were frightened. And about five minutes again, the next one. So we all get up and run out in the rain, right home. . . . all the people, cause there was plenty of us. And well, I reach home, and about five minutes I get into my room, and I was standing up and at that moment, the next one dropped just about 100 meters from my house, into a neighbor's yard. Well, it killed one boy and one old man. The boy had 28 years, and the old man was 63 years.

We see that things were serious. So I grab my child, and my mother, and I let my children know, the biggest ones, and I say "Okay, you all creep and follow." So I started to creep out and I tell them to follow me. And while I was creeping, I saw among them [the Sandinistas] the Red Cross, with a cross on the capband—but I was so in a haze, I couldn't see what uniform they had on, but there was a car with a cross with red. And I went around, going up to the next village, Kum, and, well, I saw the war tank to the church yard. Well, I sleep in the bush that evening. Sitting down, I didn't carry anything, no clothes, just what I had on, and my children what they had on, no food, rain, and fire—all night. And well, I get out to the river. . . . and we had a canoe to go over to the next side, to the river edge, and we meet up with the people from Kum. And we come together and we try to cross the people.

And these people, these Sandinista, they have done this several times to we poor Indian people. They carry us back in the woodland in the mountain [Tasba Pri] for four years and a half, bring us back last September the 6th, and bring me back to Wasla. As everyone who was coming from the concentration place [Tasba Pri], we had rice to harvest at the end of September month, the same thing—about 95 manzanas, we lost about everything. So this is going into several years now, we cannot live in peace. We cannot do nothing. We work, we work, but not for nothing. It's not me alone, it's several thousand and thousand of crying, crippled people, and we are crying every day.¹³



Life in the Refugee Camps

Images that have become familiar: the slow gait of the men, the fatigue and weariness in the women's eyes, the unsettling laughter of the children who, half or completely naked, make up the majority of the population. Like all the refugees passing through this century, they live in the expectation of a sign or a miracle.

—Elie Wiesel, "Miskitos Try to Recapture a Way of Life,"
The Los Angeles Times,
February 5, 1986

Nicaraguan Indian refugees live in settlements in both Honduras and Costa Rica. Overall, some 21,000 are registered in United Nations camps in Honduras; an additional 15,000 live in settlements near the border. In Costa Rica there are about 800 officially registered Nicaraguan Indians in UN-assisted refugee camps, while thousands of others live in unassisted settlements or on the rural economy. Outside of UN facilities, no accurate figures exist for the number of Nicaraguan Indians in Costa Rica.

In Honduras, the refugees live in three kinds of settlements: UN-sponsored camps, villages assisted by private charities, and communities aided by Honduran Miskitos and relatives of Nicaraguans living in Honduras.

The United Nations complex is headquartered at Mocoron, about 30 miles north of the Nicaraguan border and 65 miles west of the Honduran Atlantic Coast. The UN operates this facility through a contractor, World Relief Incorporated, which oversees daily operations at Mocoron and at about 40 satellite settlements. World Relief provides clothing, medicine, and medical evacuation, as well as seed and farm implements to help refugees become self-sufficient. Food rations are given to new arrivals but are gradually reduced as these people begin to farm on their own. New arrivals are typically placed in long tarpaulin-covered huts that house about 50 people. There are no cots or beds, so the refugees must sleep on the ground—which is often wet from rain-showers. As new housing becomes available, each refugee family is placed in a

bamboo hut, raised off the ground to avoid dampness.

By charter, the UN camps must be situated at least 40 kilometers from the border. But north of the Coco River, which forms the frontier, the land becomes increasingly unsuitable for cultivation. It is a vast, rolling savanna, thick with scrub brush and scattered pine forests. Away from the river, the soil turns to clay. As a result, about half of the Indian refugee

population has opted to live closer to the banks of the Coco to take advantage of better farming conditions, as they did when they lived in Nicaragua. Some just want to be closer to home when the time comes to move back.

Many of these settlements are assisted by private charities like Friends of the Americas, which operates a clinic in Rus Rus and has constructed five schools in surrounding villages. These organizations have provided medicine, building supplies,



Young Miskito men split bamboo to make walls and floors for refugee huts at a settlement near Rus Rus, Honduras.

farm tools, and seeds which have helped put the refugees back on their feet.

A small number of independent settlements appear with each new wave of refugees. Many of these people have said they prefer to remain outside institutional networks because they fear involuntary repatriation and controls on their daily activities. In most cases, they are assisted by either Honduran Miskito families or Nicaraguan relatives now residing in Honduras.

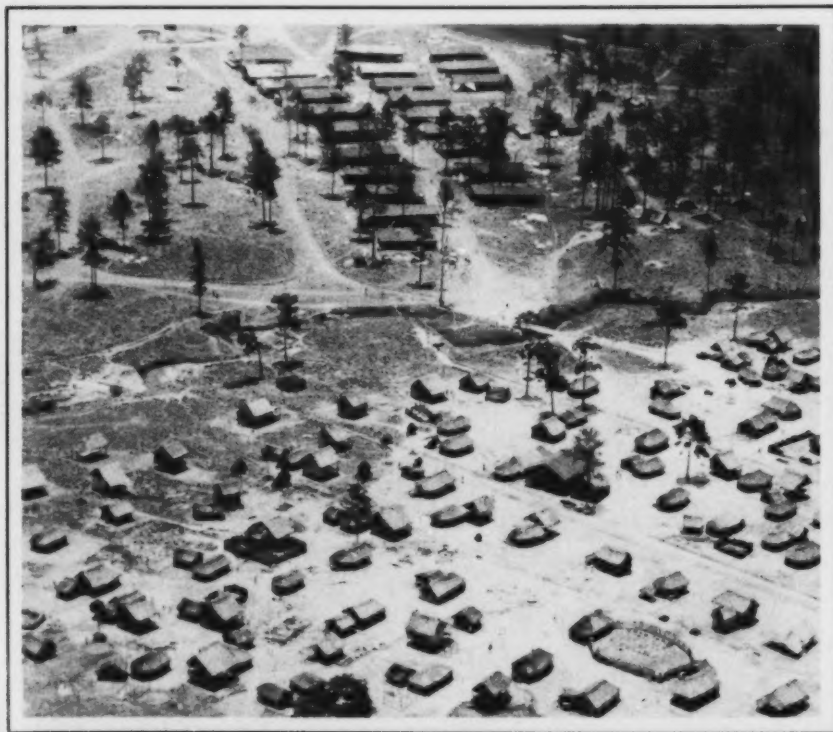
A day in the life of a typical family begins before sunup when the men leave for the rice and bean plantations. For some, the fields are a short walk from their settlement. For others, it could be a two-hour journey through double-canopy tropical forest. At daybreak, the women are already preparing a breakfast of fried bananas and beans on adobe stoves. The children are still sleeping. Later the women may tend small gardens—if they are

lucky enough to have one—grind cornmeal for tortillas, and look after children. Most men will work all day either planting, tending, or harvesting beans, rice, corn, or yucca roots. Others help build houses, chopping bamboo or weaving rows of banana leaves to thatch a roof. At dusk, the men return and the families gather for dinner. Afterwards there may be meetings with village coordinators—local Indian leaders who represent the settlements to the Miskito Council of Elders and who act as an operational liaison between the communities and the relief organizations. They also help disseminate news between families that are divided among different camps.

The Council of Elders consists of village leaders who make operational and political decisions for the Miskito exile community. It deals with the fundamental issues that face the Indians in their new life in Honduras. The Council existed primarily at the village level in Nicaragua.

Religion plays a central role in Miskito life, and on Sunday many of the refugees go to church. Most are Protestant Moravians, although there are some Catholics. In many of the settlements assisted by private charities, there are two church buildings—one for Moravians, the other for Catholics. In the border settlement of Uskana, near the confluence of the Rus Rus and Coco Rivers, Moravian pastors rehung a church bell they carried with them from their village in Nicaragua.

Although life goes on in the refugee settlements, tribal leaders still decry the lack of food, the inevitable breakup of communities as relatives and friends are scattered in different camps, the loss of means of communication, and the disappearance of a way of life once thought to be permanent. ■



Nearly 4,000 of the 7,500 new Nicaraguan Indian refugees registered in Honduras now live at the Tapam-laya camp in the tent-like structures shown at the top of this picture.



This woman tends a private garden outside her hut at the Rus Rus settlement. For many refugees, such gardens provide fruit, roots, and corn sometimes not available from nearby communal plantations.

A History of Miskito Emigration

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| <p>1981— By mid-year, 200 Miskito Indians had crossed into Honduras. By December, all but 57 refugees had joined the Indian resistance organization MISURA.</p> <p>1982— At the beginning of the year, hundreds of Miskito Indians left Nicaragua. By December, 12,000 refugees had officially registered at United Nations facilities at Mocoron, Honduras. About 8,000 more were living in unassisted settlements north of the border with Nicaragua. Some 1,000 Indians also fled to Costa Rica.</p> <p>1983— On December 23 two American priests, Bishop Salvador Schlacfer and the Reverend Wendelin Schafer, accompanied some 1,300 Miskitos on a 39-mile march from the Nicaraguan village of Francia Sirpi to the Honduran border. By year's end, 13,767 Miskito Indians had registered at UN centers near Moco-</p> | <p>ron. An additional 8,000 remained in unassisted settlements.</p> <p>1984— By December, 15,477 Miskito Indians had registered at the UN settlements. About 7,000 undocumented Miskito Indians lived in rural camps north of the Nicaraguan border.</p> <p>1985— 13,308 Miskitos were in the UN camps near Mocoron, while nearly 10,000 resided closer to the Coco River in settlements now assisted by private charities.</p> <p>1986— March 28, the first of some 10,500 new Miskito refugees from villages near Bilwaskarma and Kum began to appear at Honduran reception centers north of the Coco River, following attacks on their villages by Sandinista soldiers.</p> |
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Conclusion

Like many Nicaraguans in 1979, the Indians of the Miskito, Sumo, and Rama tribes hoped that the Sandinista Revolution would bring a fresh opportunity for social justice and foster a commitment by the new national leaders to safeguard human rights. These hopes were short-lived as the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) moved to consolidate its power. From the start, the Sandinistas could not tolerate individual expression, whether in the form of a newspaper article that disagreed with their position, or the desire of Indian populations to follow cultural traditions and chart their own future.

The memories of the massacres at Leimus, the burning of communities along the Coco River, and the years spent in relocation camps will not be easily forgotten. Such actions have intensified Indian resistance and have not produced the desired submission to Marxist social order. The Nicaraguan Indians' determination to preserve their cultural identity remains one of the greatest challenges to the Sandinista government.

The situation has often been misinterpreted by those who would separate the Indian resistance from the people it

represents. Following the March 1986 exodus to Honduras, some reports from the press and human rights groups sought to portray the rebels as an organization hostile to the interests of most of the Indians—in some instances theorizing that

they "kidnapped" entire villages and forced them to cross into Honduras. On that subject, a Miskito refugee from Bilwaskarma remarked, "Them that you call the *contra* is us, my brother, my uncle, my grandfather, and my son."



Dependence on relief agency and government aid may become a way of life for this young Miskito mother and daughter in the Mocoron refugee camp in Honduras.



This family of 12 crossed to Honduras from the Nicaraguan village of Kururia when the sound of mortars and machinegun fire reached their homes in March 1986.

Notes

¹Recorded news broadcast, Radio Sandino in Managua, April 29, 1985.

²See Bernard Nietschmann, *Between Land and Water*, Seminar Press, 1973, pp. 25-39.

³See Shirley Christian, *Nicaragua: Revolution in the Family*, Random House, 1985, p. 260. Also, John Broder, "Other War Threatens Way of Life," *Detroit News*, November 25, 1984, p. 1.

⁴The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights saw the Leimus incident as a serious abuse of human rights and called on the Nicaraguan government to investigate and to punish those responsible. The Sandinistas' response was deemed unsatisfactory. Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights of a Segment of the Nicaraguan Population of Miskito Origin*, 1984, p. 97.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 129, 130.

⁶"Statement Before the Organization of American States Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, on the Situation of the Indians in Nicaragua," by Bernard Nietschmann, October 3, 1983.

⁷A report submitted to Captain Charlotte Baltodano, Chief of Special Investigations for the Nicaraguan Interior Ministry, concluded that the event created an "international political problem" and provided several recommendations. A translation of this April 30, 1984, correspondence is contained in the U.S. Department of State Publication No. 9466, *Inside the Sandinista Regime: A Special Investigator's Perspective*, February 1986, pp. 31-37.

⁸See *SICC KISAN Newsletter*, November 1985, pp. 1-3.

⁹On January 21, 1986, a Sandinista Air Force plane reportedly bombarded the community of Layasiksa, forcing the

evacuation of about 75 families. The Sandinista government said it was trying to force a group of Indian rebels, not the visitors, to leave the village. See Nancy Nusser, "Sandinistas' Reported Bombing of Coast Shatters Fragile Peace," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 12, 1986, p. 11.

¹⁰Estimates for the Indian population vary from 70,000 (Nicaraguan government figures) to 165,000, depending on the number of Atlantic Coast residents of mixed ethnic background that are counted.

¹¹Interview in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, May 1, 1986.

¹²Interview at the Department of State, April 17, 1986.

¹³*Ibid.*

